

Invasion of the Invasives

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By Valerie Jean Rose



Be afraid, be very afraid – or at least be careful.

Do you enjoy endlessly weeding? Look forward to pruning runaway vines at least once a week from May to October? Enjoy aggravating your neighbors by growing plants that migrate onto their property?

If you answered ‘yes’ to all three questions, Ann Landers might say, “Seek professional help.” But I’m not Ann Landers, so I’m free to share ideas for planning a garden that will guarantee endless weeding, pruning, aggravating others and perhaps even inviting a visit from the Skagit Co. Noxious Weed Control Specialist!

To create a high maintenance garden, you’ll want plants that grow quickly, so fast that you must prune them frequently for months on end. How about a plant that reseeds so profusely you’ll call it a weed? Remember, one definition of ‘weed’ is ‘a plant that grows where you don’t want it.’ Some varieties propagate by runners, popping up in unexpected (and unwanted) places. Fun! Don’t forget flowers that look decrepit unless you deadhead the spent blooms every few days. Can’t wait? Let’s begin!

RELENTLESS RESEEDERS

Basket-of-Gold (*Aurinia saxatilis*) is a showy spring bloomer that reseeds prolifically, soon taking over its corner of the garden. You can plant it in a rock garden where it can cascade over the edge of a wall, but you’ll be missing out on pulling up all those little starts in the rest of your garden.

Forget-Me-Nots (*Myosotis* spp.) are short-lived plants with tiny blooms appearing in early spring. The plants then dry up and blacken, adding that neglected look to your garden. It self-seeds readily, and can especially be invasive in damp woodlands.

Lady’s Mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*) has beautiful foliage and delicate flowers. Frequent deadheading is necessary to prevent it from self-seeding and taking over your garden. Deadheading or weeding – choose your favorite!

Mallow (*Malva* spp.) Again, a popular choice for deadheading or weeding needs.

Bellflower (*Campanula* spp.) has many forms. The spreading and trailing varieties can be contained in rock gardens. But if you just can’t get enough weeding, these plants send out runners that can entwine with roots of other plants. This is not a job for a hula-hoe, it’s time to get on your knees to dig and pull – until you lose patience and tear out the Bellflower along with whatever plants its invaded. You’ve been meaning to replant that section anyway, haven’t you?

Bamboo (*Poaceae gramineae*) is a giant grass – forget about mowing this one. Selecting running varieties of bamboo will keep you busy trying to keep it from sending up sharp spike-

like new shoots as it invades everywhere. If you've been looking for an excuse to install a deep barrier of concrete or heavy metal in your yard, here's your chance! Timid – I mean, rational gardeners can plant clumping varieties to add some vertical drama to their landscape.

Springtime clusters of fragrant flowers make the Wisteria vine (*Wisteria sinensis*) a glorious element of many landscapes. Its relentlessly vigorous new branches look like delicate streamers - and can pry a roof from a building, or a house off its foundation. I inherited a wisteria vine that someone, decades ago, foolishly planted next to my garage. Most of the year I must prune it weekly to prevent it from dismantling the garage. If you really want a flowering vine, plant a clematis. Many varieties are as showy as a wisteria, and won't endanger nearby buildings.



“Wisteria may be pretty, but beware!” says Master Gardener Valerie Rose. Someone years ago located this invasive plant too close to what is now her garage. Unchecked, its branches will eventually destroy the structure, as it already has with this formerly fan-shaped trellis. **Photo courtesy of Nancy Clark.**

FROM OBNOXIOUS TO NOXIOUS

Some plants are unruly, others are annoying – and the worst are noxious. A legal term, ‘noxious weeds’ are invasive, non-native plants that are aggressive, highly competitive, highly destructive or difficult to control. Noxious weeds are costly problems for farmers and ranchers, crowding out desired crops. St. Johnswort (*Hypericum perforatum*) and Tansy Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) are two weeds that are poisonous to livestock.

Large amounts of herbicides are used to try and eradicate, or at least contain, these problem plants. They choke out native vegetation, eliminating important parts of the native food web. Some have ‘escaped’ from their role as garden ornamentals, invading forests, streams or

pastures. Oxeye Daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*) and Policeman's Helmet (*Impatiens glandulifera*) have both escaped from garden containment.

How can you tell a merely irritating plant from a noxious weed? The Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board works with landowners to identify problem plants and find effective controls, and several websites and handbooks feature helpful photos (see Resources list.)

NOT IN MY BACK YARD!?

Last year, in my own garden, I noticed a clump of tall, lovely stems growing up from the swamp next to my garage. The bright yellow flowers bloomed most of the summer. Enchanted by the flowers' longevity, I dug up some starts and planted them around my yard. I've since learned that the plant comes from a family with lousy manners: its cousin, Garden Loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) is classified as a noxious weed. Garden Loosestrife was brought to North America from Europe as an ornamental, and has displaced native vegetation along streambanks, wetlands and shorelines on this continent. It reduces habitat needed by waterfowl and fish, including several important salmon species. Garden loosestrife spreads by creeping roots called rhizomes, creating dense, underground mats that are extremely difficult to remove. I've been digging for months! I never compost these plants at home – like all invasives, only the commercial yard waste facilities grind and heat these weeds so they can't reproduce.



Clumping bamboo grows at the Discovery Garden near Mount Vernon. Gardeners can plant the clumping variety, instead of the more invasive running bamboo, to add some vertical drama to their landscape. **Photo by Scott Terrell/Skagit Valley Herald**



Basket-of-gold is a showy spring bloomer, but it reseeds prolifically, soon taking over its corner of the garden. Choose wisely where you plant it. **Photo by Scott Terrell/Skagit Valley Herald**

You may have seen lovely yellow blooms atop straight stems, gracing the banks of ponds of lakes. [Yellow flag iris](#) (*Iris pseudacorus*) has earned the title of noxious weed by displacing native vegetation along streambanks, wetlands, ponds and shorelines. They reduce habitat needed by waterfowl and fish, including several important salmon species. This iris reproduces through underground rhizomes. Sediment builds up along the plants' dense, root-like mats, sometimes up to 10 inches a year!

Luckily you can enjoy other lovely shore plants that won't harm fish habitat or bully native plants out of the neighborhood. 'Garden Wise: Non-Invasive Plants for Your Garden' is a guide featuring photos of undesirable plants (such as Yellow Iris) along with better-behaved substitutes, including Japanese Iris (*Iris ensata*) and Siberiana (*Iris sibirica*.)

Unless you enjoy creating more work for yourself, make sure your garden isn't harboring a plant on the 'most unwanted' list, and enjoy growing treats instead of tricks.

From 'Garden Wise – Non-Invasive Plants for Your Garden'

Invasive:

Common Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*)
-planted for lacy foliage

Yellow Archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*)
- shade-loving, used in baskets & groundcover

English/Atlantic Ivy (*Hedera helix* & *hibernica*)
-planted as groundcovers

Plant this Instead:

Dill (*anethum graveolens*)
Cosmos (*Cosmos bipinnatus*)

Euonymus (*Euonymus fortunei*)

Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)

RESOURCES

1. *Sunset Western Garden Book*, edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel
2. Noxious Weeds: Photos and Control Guide, King Co. Noxious Weed Board
www.kingcounty.gov/environment/animalsAndPlants/noxious-weeds/weed-identification.aspx
3. Selected Noxious Weeds of Washington State, Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board, www.nwcb.wa.gov
4. Garden Wise: Non-Invasive Plants for Your Garden, Washington State Invasive Species Coalition, www.invasivespeciescoalition.org
5. Washington Native Plant Society, www.wnps.org
6. Skagit County Master Gardeners Facebook page: enter "WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener" in the Facebook search box
7. Skagit County Noxious Weed Coordinator: Bill Rogers (360)336-9430 or williamr@co.skagit.wa.us